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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the role that colleges can play in helping welfare mothers overcome cycles of dependence and improve their career and life prospects; and indicates the ways in which colleges can benefit from the entrance of welfare mothers by improving counseling, financial aid, career counseling, and other services. After an introduction outlining ways in which all parties--taxpayers, colleges, the mothers, and their children--can benefit from colleges' targeting welfare mothers, the overall problems of poverty, and social and economic deprivation of welfare mothers, especially among blacks, are highlighted. Following an account of the case of one young welfare mother's experience in college, a review of the literature on the experience of welfare mothers in college is provided. The remainder of the paper argues that general counseling services need to concentrate more on cultural factors in the mother's experience then on sex; identifies financial aid services as the most critical area for most of the mothers attending college; highlights career counseling as normally the next most important area of concern to the mothers; and discusses the roles of other services such as student activities, registration, and health care in helping to ensure the retention and academic success of the welfare mothers. (HB)

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WELFARE MOTHERS IN COLLEGE

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Abstract

Welfare mothers constitute a substantial portion of the population. These women need college training to overcome their cycle of dependence. Colleges could benefit from entrance of welfare mothers by improving counseling, financial aid, career counseling, and other services.

Welfare Mothers in College

Introduction

This investigation of the needs of women on welfare in higher education is not a political tract. It is a description of a problem with suggested remedies. With college enrollment down, the time is ripe for concerned faculty, counselors and administrators to explore new avenues of student recruitment. By developing programs to serve special populations, such as AFDC recipients, colleges may make important social contributions while mitigating the effects of lower enrollments.

First, it must be emphasized that education for the mother on public assistance is not a right. Colleges have no moral obligation to serve these women; they violate no personal liberties by not actively designing programs and policies to accommodate them. Rather, education as a means for these women to break this cycle of dependence is sensible. Targeting this population for special consideration is something that colleges should do, for in doing so, they can make a contribution to the betterment of society: All parties -- taxpayers, colleges, the mothers and their children -- would benefit.

Definition of the problem

Between 1979 and 1981 the total number of monthly recipients of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) rose 11%, from 10, 318, 000 in 1979 to 11, 158, 000 in 1981 (all population figures, unless otherwise indicated, are from U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1984, p. 371). Given a total U. S. population

of 229.8 million in 1981 (p.6), AFDC recipients constituted 5% of the total population. Though this percentage of the total may seem small, only five states (New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Texas, and California) had populations larger than the number of AFDC recipients for that year (p. 11).

Of female headed households with children, from about one third to one half will be on welfare. Figures range from the lows in Houston and Washington, 28% and 30% respectively, to the highs in San Franscisco and Cleveland, both at 49% (Saks, 1975, p. 44). Given the 1982 figure of 14% of the general population living below the poverty line, one can see that a single female with children is about twice as likely to be in poverty as another member of the general population (p. 38).

Such poverty is a special problem among Blacks. In 1982, when 14% of the general population was living below the poverty level, 34.2% of the Black population was living below the poverty level. Also in that year, 28.4% of Black households with children were headed by women, compared to 9.6% of such households in the general population (p. 38). The per cent of Blacks below the poverty level, then, is over twenty points higher than that of the general population; the per cent of Black-female-headed households with children is nearly twenty points higher.

While these figures in no way indicate that Blacks constitute the lion's share of the problem, they do clearly illustrate that among the Black population poverty is an enormous problem. It affects over a third of Blacks, and it involves nearly one third of Black-female-headed households with children.

From a study of the literature on poverty, one could conclude that work is the only alternative to welfare for the single mother. In his collection

of essays on reform of the welfare system, Sommers (1982), for example, has collected four essays on future directions. All of these essays describe work programs. But entrance into the job market is not the best solution to the problem.

Besides her lower salary expectations, which will be described below, the mother on welfare has the added burdon of day care. "For AFDC cases, only 49% of the budgeted employment expenses and only 84% of the budgeted day-care expenses are actually borne by the Welfare Department. The rest is passed on to the client or her employer" (Saks, 1975, p. 63). A single mother with children would need to earn enough to cover her job expenses and her day-care expenses to justify her leaving her home to work. The question of work incentives is clouded by her responsibility to her family, as breadwinner and as mother.

Given a mean stay on welfare of 45.7 months (calculated for New York City female-headed households, Saks, 1975, p. 83), however, these women have time to complete at least a two-year college training program, part-time if need be, without extending their stays on welfare. With skills, these women can take higher paying jobs that will cover the cost of day care and other expenses. Further, given a career rather than a job, these women should enjoy a sense of doing better for their children and themselves.

In short, women on welfare constitute a significant portion of the population, especially the Black population. Single women with children are quite likely to be in financial trouble. Rather than moving clients from welfare directly into low paying jobs, jobs that may not cover expenses and thus keep the mother on some form of assistance, a longer range and more

permanent solution needs consideration. The welfare establishment should recognize the greater efficacy of encouraging these women to receive college training.

The case of Ann

While numbers give a broad view of the situation, a single case can bring better focus to the problem. The following case description appears with the permission and approval of the subject (the name has been changed). In many of its complications, it epitomizes the plight of the mother who is determined to create an independent life for herself and her child.

Ann is an eighteen-year-old, single, Black mother who entered the Developmental Studies Program at Randolph Technical College, Asheboro, North Carolina, in the summer after her graduation from high school. In spite of her pregnancy, she finished high school and came to college determined to be independent of her family, the father of the child, and eventually of the government. Her determination raised the hopes of college personnel who initially set up her program.

During the summer Ann was able to arrange transportation and baby-sitting with the child's father, who had a second-shift factory job. As this arrangement became more difficult, Ann decided to move into the city to be closer to the school. The Special Services Project at the school helped arrange Pell Grant, AFDC, WIC, and Public Housing assistance. Even though

receipt of Pell Grant reduced her Food Stamp payments, Ann persisted in college.

The first signs of trouble for Ann were her constant shortage of Pampers and the insistence of the North Carolina Child Support Enforcement Agency that Ann file charges against the father of the child. Pampers may be a middle-class luxury, but they are a lower-class necessity. Cloth diapers entail washing machines, and Ann could not even afford a down payment on a cheap car or deposit on a telephone. At around $9.00/box the Pampers and shortage of them became a real problem. Nonetheless, with the help of friends and the father, Ann managed.

Ann had been receiving small payments from the child's father. Because she was on AFDC, the North Carolina Child Support Enforcement Agency received her case. Since the father's name was not on the birth certificate, the agency could not prosecute for nonsupport. That office called him in to have him sign a certification of his paternity. His confusion over the legal implications of the documents and the insult he felt at the lectures he received on his responsibility engendered ill feelings within both families.

The agency told Ann that she had to pursue the nonsupport case because she received AFDC. The father and both families took that agency's actions as interference in their personal affairs. Ann was seen as culpable for that interference and came under pressure from both families. When the agency filed charges of bastardy to establish paternity -- complete with an intimidating warrant and court appearance -- Ann's previously good relationship with the father seriously deteriorated. She eventually lost his much needed support for transportation and babysitting. Ironically, the case against

the father was dropped, and Ann was left to fend for herself.

By the fall quarter, when Ann enrolled in the Electronics Engineering Program with the hope of the lucrative career that would guarantee her independence, she had received further assistance to pay a babysitter. Ann was forced to hire a neighbor to sit with the baby because the only day care center that qualified under federal regulations was full and had a long waiting list. One babysitter is not a dependable source of day care. Attendance policies at the college allowed for illnesses of students but not for babysitters and children. The fall flu season kept Ann away from her classes, and without a phone, calling teachers to receive assignments was difficult. Ann's grades were so poor she had to change programs to remain in school. She is still enrolled and is working on her problems.

Welfare mothers as students

Though the literature on women in college abounds, very little of it focuses on the welfare mother. On the whole, the welfare mother has little in common with the traditional, middle-class college student and perhaps even less with her fellow women on campus: Women in college have tended to be from higher socio-economic levels than their male counterparts (Cross, In Mednick, 1975, p. 346). The welfare mother may thus be poorly served by programs aimed at the traditional female college student and may feel alienated in programs designed to support female students.

Forsythe (1978-79) and Young (1977) describe programs for welfare mothers in community colleges. Because the community college system is decentralized,

open-admission, inexpensive, and geared to give shorter term training in technical fields that pay well, it is the best source of training for the welfare mother. According to Forsythe and Young,welfare mothers do well in community colleges, and community colleges are willing and able to accommodate them.

Studying welfare mothers at Jefferson Community College in Louisville, Kentucky, Young found that the majority were academically successful. Fifty-nine per cent had C averages, and one fifth had better than B averages. Fifty-seven per cent completed at least one academic year in college (p. 39).

Young identifies problems of maturity and finances as the major problems of these women. Her study found that "of those with a C or better average, 65 per cent were older mothers (25 or over)" and that "over 60 per cent of those with less than a C average were under 25 years of age" (p. 39). This higher success was attained with more problems and responsibilities and children than for the younger mothers (pp. 40-41). Educational backgrounds were par, so Young concluded that the older mothers' maturity was a factor (p. 44).

Forsythe concentrates her work on the newly divorced woman on the welfare rolls -- the displaced homemakers. Her study outlines several pilot projects that illustate the community college's willingness to experiment with means of accommodating the welfare mother. Most of these programs are in the area of student development, such as the career exploration programs at Lane Community College in Oregon and Eastfield Community College in Texas (pp. 24 - 25). Since community collegeshave compensatory education programs in place, it will be up to the student development offices to design accommodations.

General counseling services

Though the important work on the re-entry woman has little bearing on the plight of the welfare mother, its literature stands to be examined as the norm of current practice in counseling women with families in higher education. The danger of designing programs for welfare mothers lies in carrying the assumptions of counseling re-entry women into the area of counseling welfare mothers. (A re-entry woman is a mother who returns to college.)

For the purpose of general review, McGraw (1982), Suchinsky (1982), Knefelkamp (1976), Brooks (1976), Hetherington (1981), and Adelstein (1983) have produced representative studies. Overall, these studies describe female students in need of help in self-actualizing or becoming more aware of their inner lives. Knefelkamp applies Perry's model of student development to counseling women. Brooks proposes services for "role conflict and guilt," "time management" (balancing social lives, family and school) and low self-confidence because of age(pp. 35-36). Hetherington proposes programs in values clarification, decision making, assertiveness, and, through assertiveness, anxiety management. All of these programs are indeed ideal for the middle-class woman for whom college is seen as a first chance for direct self-fulfillment after a life of receiving satisfaction "vicariously through spouses and offspring" (McGraw, 1982, p. 469).

When college is a response to economic necessity rather than a response to inner, developmental needs, the counseling approach must take an entirely different perspective. Welfare mothers are not people who are able, at the point at which they enter college, to self-actualize. According to Maslow,

"If all the [physiological] needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background" (1962, p. 95). Indeed, Harrington reports that the poor tend to ignore even severe and obvious cases of psychological disturbance around them (1963, pp. 121-138).

Counseling for welfare mothers needs to concentrate more on culture than on sex, for treating welfare mothers along with re-entry women could have serious consequences. At the very least, the welfare mother would be amused at the expressions of distress of the middle-class female in group sessions.

In addition, the welfare mother is more likely to receive counseling from someone who is culturally different. The counselor must be very much aware of this possibilty. Harrington (1963) reports on middle-class psychologists treating the poor: "The middle class does not understand the narrowness of its own judgments. And worse, it acts upon them as if they were universal and accepted by everyone" (p. 128). The middle-class student development worker must see through his own biases and respond to the needs expressed by the welfare mother.

Meadows (1978) has provided a superlative outline for the counselor who will be working with the culturally different, especially the indigent. He first warns his collegues that both the process and the goals of counseling must be "consistent with [the client's] values and life experiences" (p. 153). To overcome and work with racism and sexism, Meadows recommends three levels of learning: At the first, "feeling level," the counselors will examine their own attitudes; at the next, "experience level," counselors will experience

through simulation games, "what it is like to be part of a minority group or an outsider," and at the role-taking level the counselors apply what they have learned to hypothetical situations (p. 154).

After this education, the counselor must remain on guard for the "stumbling blocks"(p. 154). These are language (especially dialect, which can assign alternate meanings to words), nonverbals (and their symbolic meanings), preconceptions and stereotypes (which interfere with objective evaluations), and ethnocentric racism (p. 154). Harrington's concern about psychologists' evaluations of indigent clients aptly illustrates problems with preconceptions and ethnocentrism. Although language may seem a simple matter of boning up on dialect, the preponderance of slang in dialects can have a counselor completely missing the point of a conversation. In Black slang, for example, to talk means to have sexual intercourse. A counselor who is not aware of this use of the word may be confused when a Black student reports having trouble with someone she used to talk to.

The counselor of the culturally different will need to be ingenious and sensitive. He should try not to make any assumptions prior to learning about the client's values and life experiences. He is left with the dilemma, so well expressed by Meadows, of whether to focus on the basic human similarities, thus ignoring the differences, or to focus on the differences at the expense of appreciating the similarities (p. 155). Meadows still concludes that the counselor must use his own judgment to obtain "the optimum condition" of counseling that is "consistent with [the client's] values and life experiences" (p. 155).

Counselor training in cultural difference, then, is a top priority for services for the welfare mother. The mother is quite often Black, and the counselor,

a white, middle-class male. The training that male counselors have received in counseling women, however, could be misleading. Welfare mothers have more immediate needs to attend to than do middle-class, re-entry women. Other, developmental concerns may have to take a backseat to these immediate needs.

Finally, counselors will have to pass on their training in cultural difference to faculty or administrators. To return to Harrington's point, that the middle class in very narrow in its perceptions, the counselor will have to intervene when cultural difference causes problems for the student. Remembering Meadows's dilemma of cultural differences and human similarities, the counselor will have to encourage staff to see through the differences to the basic, human similarities. The middle class, for example, can be blind to its own pecuniary use for education and contend that education is, and should be, pursued for itself. This attitude, of course, is foreign to the welfare mother who must use education for more pragmatic ends.

Problems will arise when the student on assistance begs for mercy in grading, a practice common enough among college students. But the student on assistance will admit to trying to save her education benefits. "She's only here for her check" will be the complaint. The counselor at this point will have to talk middle class to middle class to make the staff member aware of his double standard. "So why did you go to college?" is a good response, if put in the right manner. Depending in the counselor's personal relationship with the staff member, he might add something along the lines of "I don't know about you, but I only kept my grades up because I knew that my parents would make me come home and get a job if I didn't." Draft-dodger to draft-dodger would likewise be a good stance.

Financial-aid services

As is evident from the above discussion of general counseling services, financial problems will be foremost in the minds of welfare mothers. These financial problems will have to be addressed before other matters can have consideration, and counselors will have to remain ever aware of this situation. Young's study (1977) found that "the greatest barrier to a woman's ability to stay in school involved finances and government support services" (p. 41).

The College Board (1984) in a report just published found that recent federal policy contains many contradictions:

> On the one hand, the federal government has sought to increase educational opportunity by providing financial aid programs to help meet college costs for those unable to pay for post-secondary education on their own The substantial federal investment in student aid programs is premised on the belief that attainment of college education provides the best opportunity for low-income citizens to break the poverty cycle (lneck, 1977). On the other hand, low-income people may be penalized by the public assistance programs upon which they rely for basic assistance if they try to take advantage of student financial aid programs and pursue higher education (p. 2).

Though noting that federal policy would have to change to correct this contradiction, the College Board very practically recommends that the problem be addressed on the local and state levels (p. 2).

The college financial aid officer (FAO) will have to become expert in the federal regulation of AFDC and other programs and should maintain a good working relationship with local AFDC officials. The bright spot in this problem is indeed

the discretion that local officials have in interpreting federal regulation. The FAO can accomplish a great deal toward avoiding cuts in students' public assistance checks because of receipt of education benefits by tailoring payment systems and terminology to suit the local AFDC official's reading of the federal regulations. The College Board, thus, recommends the following, among others:

> --developing effective communication with agencies administering AFDC programs
>
> --assisting AFDC recipients in negotiating job search, work and other AFDC requirements that can conflict with [college] enrollment
>
> --influencing the way student financial aid is treated in the calculation of income . . .
>
> --assisting AFDC recipients in securing child care (p. 3).

Even when the AFDC problem is worked out, students may find that other forms of assistance are cut when they receive education benefits.

One financial aid officer who solved the AFDC problem met the Food Stamp problem. The Food Stamp administrator cut benefits according to the amount of Pell Grant money beyond tuition and fees, money allocated for books, transportation, and other indirect expenses. "So I asked the guy," the FAO reports of her conversation with the Food Stamp administrator, "Are you giving our students the choice between food and books?" At last report, the Food Stamp administrator was "working on the problem" (Cecil, 1984).

Because the FAO will become an advocate for the welfare mother, it would be most sensible to assign any special projects dealing with welfare mothers to the FAO. The FAO then could monitor the students' progress and refer the student to other services when needs become apparent.

It must be remembered, however, that the poor are more likely to ignore psychological disturbance. Ideally, then, the FAO should be trained to observe welfare mothers for signs of development and perhaps even to track the developmental progress of welfare mothers to provide information to student development counselors when referrals are necessary. If the FAO has no training in student development, such training would be in order.

Career counseling

After the financial aid officer, the second most important member of the student development staff for the welfare mother is the career counselor. Again, welfare mothers with the existing responsibility of supporting their families do not immediately have the luxuries of self-actualization that traditional students or even the re-entry women have. Salary expectations will have greater importance for these women than most other factors in career choice.

When dealing with the Black welfare mother, the career counselor needs to be aware of the impact that the aggressive-mammy stereotype might have on the student's career choice. Scott (1977) observes that "the reluctance of a Black woman to seek additional professional training or to explore new job options could be related to a fear of being labeled dominant" (p. 136). Inherent in this fear is the myth that women who enter traditionally male fields -- those fields that promise the more lucrative salaries -- are also aggressive.

Hutt (1983) suggests that the woman-in-a-man's-job is now perfectly

comfortable in her maternal and professional roles (p. 240). Since Hutt's study was conducted among a general college population, it probably applies more to changing middle-class attitudes than to those of the lower classes, which may be more conservative. The importance of this finding is perhaps in making the welfare mother aware of these changes in attitude and, thus, more comfortable in a career in a technical field.

After an appropriate career choice is made, the career counselor should follow through with the welfare mother's progress in her classes. Especially for Black women in technical fields, a sense of isolation may discourage progress. Scott (1977) has identified problems of lack of self-confidence (feeling inferior to whites, especially the male classmates) in the classroom as well as feelings of isolation and alienation (p. 137). Evidently, a buddy system whereby the career counselor schedules a group of Black welfare mothers together for classes would greatly help. Other pressures that Black women might feel in their careers, after graduation, according to Scott, are "lack of role models" and "the pressure to be 'super Blacks' and 'super women'" (p.137).

Nonetheless, Scott found that Black women remain optimistic about their class work and tend to do well in white-male dominated fields.Further, Scott identified this success with 'rugged determination," a good quality if not turned against the woman (p. 138). Thus, the career counselor who encourages these women to make the choice of a male-dominated field should have no undue fears about the welfare mother's ability to handle the pressure of that choice.

Choosing a male-dominated field may still not guarantee an adequate

salary. The career counselor will have to discuss salary discrimination with the welfare mother. Though observers may rationalize salary discrimination as caused by women's career choices and their late entrance into the job market, a recent study has found that for all students who graduated in the same year (1979) from the same university, blatant discrimination in starting salaries existed within the same occupational categories (Knight, 1983, p. 152).

Overall, this study found that women make about one quarter less than men in each occupational category. For managerial, professional, and technical fields -- the most lucrative-- the difference in mean starting salary was an enormous 33%, with men starting at $14, 424 and women at $10, 866. Ironically with the advent of the middle-class, two-salary family, the old justification that men must make higher salaries than women because men must support households works against the very population that will be the sole support of a household, the single mother.

Remaining aware of the aggressive-Black-woman stereotype, the career counselor will have to develop strategies to help the welfare mother avoid salary discrimination. Initially, the career counselor will have to supply the welfare mother with a list of reasonable salary expectations. Role-playing salary negotiations would be an important part of the student's instruction in interviewing skills. Lastly, the career counselor will have to be aware that a salary that may be too low will appear quite high to someone who has been struggling on public assistance.

Other services

After the important areas of counselor attitudes, financial aid, and career counseling, have been addressed, the college may develop other programs for the welfare mother. Student activities, registration, and health care are major targets for development.

In procedures and student activities, the children of the welfare mother should be taken into consideration. Often, the children must come with the mother to school during registration. Colleges should allow these women special status, such as allowing them to move to the front of lines so that they will not have to wait in long lines with figeting children. Other students may appreciate having screaming infants moved out of the process, but most importantly, such consideration gives a powerful signal to the welfare mother. She is certain to feel that she is welcome and among people who will help her.

In student activities as well, the welfare mothers need accommodations. Aside from activities that allow for children, colleges will need to be aware of sex and cultural bias in student activities. Sagria and Sagria (1984) stress the use of needs assessment in planning student activities to avoid sex bias. Given that the welfare mother is culturally different as well, student activities, when planned by a middle-class staff, may have no appeal for welfare mothers. The student development office should consider differing values and make extensive surveys of students part of its programming of extra-curricular activities.

Lastly, health care is another area for development. Dai and Papalia (1983) have developed a model for cooperative strategy between student development offices and campus health services for women students. Though this model involved

only gynecological services and an on-campus health service, which community colleges do not have, its principles can be applied to welfare mothers with a wide range of needs. The student development office could work closely with the local health department on counseling mothers on good health and referring medical problems when they arise.

Conclusion

At this time of lower enrollments, colleges could benefit from enrollment of welfare mothers. These women are likely to be good students and would need no drastic changes in curriculum to succeed. Student development offices can do much to accommodate these women. Training of staff, improvements in financial-aid services, and special attention to career counseling would help not only the welfare mother but the student development office as well. Services and personnel would become more flexible and more responsive to all nontraditional students. Given that Title III, Title IV and Title IX money is available from the federal government to make these improvements, any college could easily benefit from targeting the welfare mother for special consideration.

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